

ISSUES OF GENDER EQUALITY AND SOCIAL EQUALITY IN INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE

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Abstract

Intercultural dialogue plays a crucial role in promoting mutual understanding, peaceful coexistence, and social cohesion in increasingly diverse societies. However, dialogue across cultures does not occur in a neutral or equal space. Gender inequality and broader forms of social inequality often shape who participates, whose voices are heard, and whose perspectives are legitimized. This article examines key issues of gender equality and social equality within the context of intercultural dialogue. Drawing on human rights frameworks and the concept of intersectionality, the study analyzes structural barriers, cultural stereotypes, and institutional inequalities that limit inclusive participation. The article argues that gender equality and social justice must be treated as foundational principles—not optional outcomes—of intercultural dialogue. Finally, it proposes policy- and education-oriented strategies to promote inclusive, equitable, and rights-based intercultural engagement.

Keywords: Intercultural dialogue, gender equality, social equality, intersectionality, inclusion, human rights.

Introduction

Globalization, migration, and technological development have intensified interactions between individuals and communities from diverse cultural backgrounds. In this context, intercultural dialogue has emerged as a key mechanism for fostering mutual understanding, social cohesion, and democratic participation. International organizations such as UNESCO, the Council of Europe, and the United Nations emphasize intercultural dialogue as a tool for peace-building and sustainable development. Despite its normative commitment to equality and respect, intercultural dialogue often takes place within unequal social structures. Gender-based discrimination, socio-economic inequality, and systemic exclusion continue to influence participation and power relations within dialogue processes. Women, ethnic minorities, migrants, persons with disabilities, and other marginalized groups frequently face barriers that limit their ability to engage on equal terms (UN Women, 2015). This article explores how issues of gender equality and social equality intersect with intercultural dialogue. It argues that without a clear human-rights-based and intersectional approach, intercultural dialogue risks reproducing existing inequalities rather than challenging them.

II. Theoretical Framework. Intercultural Dialogue and Human Rights

Intercultural dialogue is widely conceptualized as a process of open, respectful, and sustained interaction between individuals and groups from different cultural backgrounds. According to the Council of Europe (2008), intercultural dialogue must be grounded in universal human rights, democracy, and the rule of law. This normative foundation establishes clear boundaries: cultural practices cannot be invoked to justify discrimination, exclusion, or violations of fundamental rights.

From a human-rights perspective, gender equality is not a negotiable cultural preference but a core democratic value. Sen (1999) argues that freedoms—including gender equality—are both the primary means and ultimate goals of development. In intercultural settings, unequal power relations may silence marginalized voices, particularly women and minority groups, thereby undermining the dialogic process itself. Moreover, Habermas's (1984) theory of communicative action emphasizes that genuine dialogue requires conditions of equality, absence of coercion, and mutual recognition. When gender or social hierarchies dominate communicative spaces, dialogue becomes asymmetrical and exclusionary. Thus, intercultural dialogue that ignores gender and social inequalities risks becoming symbolic rather than transformative. **Gender Equality and Social Equality.** Gender equality refers to equal rights, responsibilities, and opportunities for women and men, while social equality encompasses broader dimensions such as class, ethnicity, disability, age, language, and migration status. Scholars argue that gender inequality is deeply embedded in social, economic, and political institutions and cannot be addressed in isolation (Connell, 2012). UN Women (2015) distinguishes between formal equality (legal equality) and substantive equality, which focuses on real-life outcomes, access to resources, and structural disadvantages. In intercultural dialogue, formal inclusion—such as inviting women to participate—does not automatically translate into meaningful participation or influence. Bourdieu's (1991) concept of symbolic power further explains how dominant cultural norms shape whose knowledge is considered legitimate. Women and socially marginalized groups often possess limited symbolic capital, which reduces their authority and visibility in intercultural discussions. **Intersectionality as an Analytical Lens.** The concept of intersectionality, introduced by Crenshaw (1989), provides a critical framework for understanding how multiple forms of inequality intersect and compound one another. Gender discrimination often overlaps with racial, ethnic, economic, and linguistic marginalization, producing complex patterns of exclusion. In the context of intercultural dialogue, intersectionality reveals why single-axis approaches to equality are insufficient. For instance, policies aimed at increasing women's participation may fail to reach migrant women or women with disabilities if language access, mobility, or safety concerns are not addressed (Yuval-Davis, 2006). The European Parliament (2016) stresses that intercultural policies must adopt an intersectional approach to avoid reinforcing hierarchies within marginalized groups. Intersectionality thus shifts the focus from abstract notions of equality to lived experiences and differentiated needs.

III. Key Issues in Intercultural Dialogue. Unequal Representation and Power Asymmetries.

Asymmetries. One of the most persistent challenges in intercultural dialogue is unequal representation. Dialogue initiatives frequently rely on formal leaders or institutional representatives, who are predominantly male and socially privileged. As a result, women, youth, and informal community members are often excluded from agenda-setting and decision-making processes (UNESCO, 2019). Feminist scholars argue that participation without power is insufficient (Cornwall, 2008). Even when women are physically present, they may be marginalized through interruption, dismissal, or lack of acknowledgment. These dynamics reflect broader patriarchal structures that shape communicative practices.

Gender Stereotypes and Cultural Relativism. Gender stereotypes play a significant role in shaping intercultural interactions. Traditional gender roles may restrict women's mobility, public engagement, or leadership opportunities. When such norms are treated as untouchable "cultural values," intercultural dialogue risks legitimizing inequality. Okin (1999) critically questions whether multiculturalism is always compatible with women's rights, warning that uncritical cultural relativism may entrench patriarchal practices. Consequently, intercultural dialogue must adopt a **rights-based approach** that distinguishes cultural diversity from gender discrimination.

Structural and Institutional Barriers. Social inequality is not merely interpersonal but deeply structural. Limited access to education, employment, healthcare, childcare, and digital technologies disproportionately affects women and marginalized groups. These constraints significantly limit their ability to engage in intercultural dialogue (UNESCO, 2025). Giddens (1991) highlights how social structures shape individual agency. Without institutional support—such as flexible scheduling, financial assistance, and accessible communication formats—intercultural dialogue remains inaccessible to many.

Multiple and Intersectional Discrimination. Individuals who experience multiple forms of discrimination face compounded exclusion. For example, migrant women may confront gender bias, xenophobia, and language barriers simultaneously. Such intersectional disadvantages often remain invisible in mainstream dialogue initiatives (Crenshaw, 1989). Jiménez Rodrigo (2022) emphasizes that equality policies must address these overlapping inequalities through targeted and context-sensitive strategies rather than one-size-fits-all solutions.

IV. Discussion: Strategies for Promoting Equality. Gender Mainstreaming and Institutional Accountability.

Gender mainstreaming involves integrating gender perspectives into all stages of policy and program development. In intercultural dialogue, this means assessing how dialogue topics, formats, and outcomes affect different groups differently. UN Women (2015) argues that gender mainstreaming must be accompanied by accountability mechanisms, including gender-sensitive indicators, monitoring frameworks, and evaluation tools. Without such mechanisms, equality commitments remain rhetorical.

Inclusive Participation and Safe Dialogic Spaces. Inclusive intercultural dialogue requires practical measures that lower participation barriers. These include providing childcare, transportation support, interpretation services, and accessible venues. Digital platforms can enhance inclusion but may also reproduce digital inequalities if access and literacy are uneven. Creating safe spaces—free from harassment, discrimination, and intimidation—is essential, particularly for

women and marginalized participants. According to Fraser (1990), alternative or “counter-public” spaces allow marginalized groups to articulate their perspectives before entering broader public discourse. **Education, Training, and Capacity Building.** Education is a critical driver of both gender equality and intercultural competence. Educational programs should address gender stereotypes, critical media literacy, human rights, and conflict-sensitive communication. Training facilitators in gender-sensitive moderation and inclusive mediation is particularly important. European Parliament (2016) reports highlight that facilitators play a key role in managing power imbalances and ensuring equitable participation. **Cultural Policies and Media Representation.** Cultural industries and media significantly shape narratives about gender and diversity. UNESCO (2025) emphasizes that promoting gender equality in cultural leadership and production enhances the visibility of diverse voices and perspectives. Equitable representation in media contributes to challenging stereotypes and expanding the range of identities considered legitimate within intercultural dialogue.

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